

FIFTY-FIVE FICTION: 55-WORD SHORT STORIES

--- from the World's Shortest Stories, edited by Steve Moss

The Rules

A story is a story only if it contains the following elements:

- 1). a setting
- 2). a character or characters
- 3). conflict
- 4). resolution

Regarding the above:

- All stories have to be happening someplace, which means they have to have a setting of some kind, even if it's the other side of the universe, the inner reaches of someone's mind, or just the house next door.
- Characters can have infinite variations. People, animals, clouds, microbes. Anything.
- By conflict, we mean that something has to happen. People argue, the deer flees. The astronauts wait in anticipation. Even in this last example, something is happening, even though no one is moving or talking. There is conflict, which leads to:
- The outcome of the story, known also as the resolution. This doesn't mean there is a moral ("Justice has its own reward," "In the end, love triumphs"), or even that the conflict itself is resolved. It may or may not be. But what it does mean is that when the story ends, someone has to have learned something. It's possible to have none of the characters learn anything, but if that's the case, then the reader must.

An example:

BEDTIME STORY

"Careful, honey, it's loaded," he said, re-entering the bedroom.
Her back rested against the headboard. "This is for your wife?"
"No. Too chancy. I'm hiring a professional."
"How about me?"
He smirked. "Cute. But who'd be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?"
She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.
"Your wife."

JEFFREY WHITMORE

Notice how much he achieves through suggestion. We know the characters are having an affair, but the author never says so. We also know there's a gun in the story, but it's never directly mentioned. In fact, Whitmore's tale is actually two stories. The second one—the other conspiracy—reveals itself in the final two words.

Also notice that there are no descriptive adverbs or adjectives, and yet we see the scene perfectly. The author then stretches the form by having his story start even before his narrative begins, and end beyond his final phrase, making it seem longer than just 55 words.


The main advantage to suggestion is conveying information economically—when the reader knows what you're talking about without your saying so, fewer words are needed. The disadvantage is losing sight of whether the reader is following you. Too much suggestion becomes obscure and confusing. That's a common error. So is trying to tell too complicated a story in such a tiny space. Fifty-five fiction demands a tight focus.

A few other important points:

- * You can't use more than 55 words.
- * Hyphenated words can't count as single words. For example, "blue-green dress" is three words. However, "re-entry" is one word.
- * Your story's title isn't included in the word count, but it can't be more than seven words long.
- * Contractions count as single words. For example, "He'll jump" is two words.
- * An initial counts as a single word.
- * Numbers count as words.
- * Any punctuation is allowed. Punctuation does not count as words.

IMPORTANT! AVOID THE FOLLOWING CLICHES! STAY AWAY FROM THE FOLLOWING STORIES:

- the reader discovers the protagonist is actually a cat (or some other animal)
- characters who appear to be having sex, but it turns out are doing something innocent and mundane
- any character who wakes up at the end and says, "Gosh, it was all a dream!"

 At the bottom of your story, label the essential elements you included.

Setting—
Characters—
Conflict—
Resolution—